

091 982330
ASW
MARCH
8 2002
PATENT

Our Reference: BRF-100-B

VEHICLE AIRBAG ARRESTOR

CROSS-REFERENCE TO CO-PENDING APPLICATION

[0001] This application claims the benefit of the priority date of the co-pending provisional U.S. Application Serial No. 60/241,313, filed October 18, 2000 in the name of Robert D. Burgess and entitled "VEHICLE AIRBAG ARRESTOR", the contents of which are incorporated herein in their entirety.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Today's vehicles are provided with passenger restraint devices, such as inflatable airbags, which are mounted in various locations within the vehicle, including within the steering wheel.

[0003] Sensors mounted at appropriate locations within the vehicle provide a signal to an inflation device when a predetermined amount of force contact is made with another object. The inflation device generates or supplies a quantity of gas to inflate the airbag and thereby cushion the forward movement of the driver of the vehicle and resulting from a front collision.

[0004] While airbags have proven to be effective in saving people's lives by minimizing injuries during a front vehicle collision, it has been found that in certain circumstances the airbag inflation device may be armed, but may not have gone off. This armed state lasts for a predetermined period of time, such as two minutes, before the inflation device resets itself to an inactive state.

En 917
[0005] ~~Frequently, in serious collisions, the driver is trapped within the surrounding vehicle body and literally, the vehicle body must be cut away from the driver in order to remove the driver from the vehicle. The so-called "jaws of life" are used in such a situation. A further complication in vehicle collisions is that an emergency person, such as a fireman, E.M.S., etc., may be required to attend to a driver trapped within a vehicle until the vehicle sheet metal is cut away or removed to enable the driver to be removed from the vehicle. Such emergency persons may be required to give resuscitation, C.P.R., or other medical assistance until the driver can be removed from the vehicle and attended to in a more adequate facility, such as a hospital, E.M.S. vehicle, etc.~~

0982330-101801

[0006] In such a circumstance, the emergency person's head can be situated between the airbag in the vehicle steering wheel and the driver's head. This places the emergency person's head in a precarious position, particularly where the airbag inflation sensor may have been activated, but, for some reason, the inflation device has not yet activated to inflate the airbag.

[0007] In the event that the airbag inflates under its considerable force and speed when the emergency person's head is between the airbag and the driver's head, the emergency person's head will be forced into the driver's head, thereby creating the potential for serious injury to the emergency person as well as to the driver.

[0008] One attempt to address this problem is an emergency service device in the form of a circular steel plate with two large hooks protruding from an upper portion. The rear side of the steel plate is fitted with a series of triangle deflators which engage and rip open the airbag. The main body of the steel plate is slotted to accommodate the adjustable placement of a secondary inner body in the form of a rectangular steel plate with two hooks protruding from a lower portion. When assembled together, the upper and lower portions of the two steel plates can be adjusted to accommodate different steering wheel dimensions. A tensioning knob extends through the circular plate and allows adjustment of the lower hooks on the inner plate. Once the hooks are securely in place, the tensioning knob is tightened. A dust cover is fastened around the steering wheel and the plate/hook assembly and tightened in place about the steering column by a strapping band. Ventilation openings are provided between the inner surface of the dust cover and the steering column when the dust cover strap is tightened.

[0009] However, this prior attempt at an airbag arrestor addresses the aforementioned problems with a complicated, multi-part device which requires several attachment steps and a tightening operation to secure the main device in place, and an additional installation step to add the dust cover. This takes time and can be a cumbersome task in the typically confined space existing in a crushed vehicle after a collision. At the same time, the dust cover in this device provides only a dust containment enclosure for the smoke and debris emitted by the airbag module

09582330-101301

during airbag inflation. The dust cover is not intended to suppress the entire airbag inflation as it is only provided as a dust and debris control enclosure.

- [0010] Thus, it would be desirable to alleviate these potential problems. It would also be desirable to provide a device which contains the inflation of a vehicle airbag without significant expansion of the airbag. It would also be desirable to provide an airbag containment device which can be easily employed by an emergency person, preferably by one hand. It would also be desirable to provide an airbag containment device which can be repeatedly used in many emergency situations.

SUMMARY

- [0011] The present invention is an vehicle airbag arrestor which uniquely arrests and contains the inflation pressures in the vehicle airbag when the airbag arrestor is mounted about a vehicle steering wheel and steering column.

- [0012] In one aspect, the airbag arrestor of the present invention includes a flexible, high strength enclosure having an open end. An attachment means is mountable about the enclosure to non-axially movably mount the enclosure about a vehicle steering column and a vehicle steering wheel containing an airbag module. The high strength, yet flexible nature of the material employed to form the airbag arrestor enclosure enables the enclosure to be easily mounted about a vehicle steering wheel and airbag module and a portion of the vehicle steering column and be securely fixed in place by the attachment means; while at the same time having sufficient strength to resist any substantial axial movement of the end of the enclosure with respect to the vehicle steering column and steering wheel so as to contain and redirect the explosive forces generated during airbag inflation.

- [0013] The attachment means is, in one aspect, in the form of a strap or cord which is carried on the enclosure or is attachable to the enclosure. A connector can be mounted on the strap to enable a free end of the strap to be tightened about the enclosure to conform a sidewall of the enclosure adjacent to the open end tightly about the vehicle steering column while still allowing ventilation through the open end of the enclosure.

- [0014] In another aspect, the connector includes at least one and possibly two biased latched members mounted in a body through which both ends of the strap or

09982330-101801

cord extend. Either free end of the cord can be drawn in one direction away from the body to tighten the cord about the enclosure. However, the latch members prevent reverse loosening movement of the strap thereby maintaining the strap in the tightened position until the associated latch member is moved to an unlatched position. In this position, one end of the strap or cord can be pulled through the latch thereby loosening the strap for removal of the enclosure from the steering column.

[0015] The airbag arrestor of the present invention overcomes certain deficiencies found in prior art airbag arrestors in that the present airbag arrestor may be easily and quickly installed and secured in a fixed, substantially non-axially movable position about a vehicle steering column and steering wheel without requiring an excessive number of mounting steps. The present airbag arrestor may be secured in place about the vehicle steering column by an essentially one hand operation which can be crucial in emergency conditions.

[0016] The present airbag arrestor uniquely confines and redirects the explosive gasses generated during airbag inflation away from the outer end of the airbag arrestor enclosure. This provides increased safety to emergency personnel which may have his or her head positioned between the airbag in the vehicle steering wheel and the driver while giving emergency care or attempting to remove the driver from the vehicle.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0017] The various features, advantages and other uses of the present invention will become more apparent by referring to the following detailed description and drawing in which:

[0018] Fig. 1 is a perspective view of an airbag arrestor according to the present invention;

[0019] Fig. 2 is an enlarged, perspective view of the latch device mounted on one end of the airbag arrestor shown in Fig. 1;

[0020] Fig. 3 is a perspective view showing the airbag arrestor of Figs. 1 and 2 mounted in a use position on a vehicle steering column and steering wheel;

[0021] Fig. 4 is a perspective view of an alternate latch which may be employed in the airbag arrestor of the present invention; and

09982330-101801

[0022] Fig. 5 is a perspective view of yet another latch which may be employed with the airbag arrestor of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0023] Referring now to the drawings, and to Figs. 1 - 3 in particular, there is depicted a first aspect of an airbag arrestor 10 according to the present invention. The airbag arrestor 10 is in the form of an enclosure 12 formed of a strong, but flexible material. The enclosure 12 has a generally cylindrical portion 14 extending from a first end 16 to an opposed second end 18. A generally flat end wall 20 is formed at the second end 18 of the sidewall 14. The enclosure 12 is preferably formed of a one-piece construction, although the sidewall 14 and the end wall 20 may be formed as separate panels or members which are securely joined together, such as by stitching, etc.

[0024] The first end 16 defines an interior opening end having a diameter sufficient to enable the first end 16 to be slid over a vehicle steering wheel 22 shown in phantom in Fig. 3.

[0025] Although the enclosure 12 preferably has the shape shown in Fig. 1, it will be understood that the enclosure 12 may take other shapes, such as a generally spherical shape extending from the first end 16.

[0026] In general, the enclosure 12 is formed with a steering wheel encompassing portion formed adjacent to the end wall 20 and a steering column attachment portion adjacent to the first end 16.

[0027] The enclosure 12 has a suitable length to facilitate easy mounting over a vehicle steering wheel 22 while enabling the first end 16 to be cinched down or tightened to a small diameter to hold the enclosure 12 securely and substantially non-movably on a vehicle steering column 24 to which the steering wheel 22 is mounted. The sidewall 14 may have a length sufficient to dispose the first end 16 over the steering column 24 axially over any elongated levers, such as a transmission shift lever, windshield wiper control lever, etc., which are typically mounted on vehicle steering columns to control various vehicle operating circuits and devices. Alternately, the sidewall 14 may have an elongated length sufficient to enable the first end 16 to be disposed entirely over all such levers and further along the length of the

09982330-101801

steering column 24 while enabling the first end 16 to be cinched down to a small diameter substantially in tight engagement with the outer diameter of the steering column 24.

[0028] The enclosure 12 is preferably formed of a lightweight, flexible, yet strong material. One preferred material is ballistic material used in soft body armor. KEVLAR is a typical fiber employed in such soft body armor. While the use of ballistic material is preferred, it will be understood that the enclosure 12 may be formed of other strong, but flexible materials having sufficient strength to not expand to any significant degree despite the full force inflation of an airbag within the interior of the enclosure 12 as described hereafter.

[0029] Attachment means 30 are mounted on the enclosure 12, generally adjacent the first end 16 as shown in Fig. 1 and in greater detail in Fig. 2. The attachment means 30 functions to enable the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 to be expanded to its full open diameter; yet to be able to be cinched or tightly secured in a significantly smaller diameter in secure, substantially non-movable engagement about the vehicle steering column 24. Ideally, the attachment means 30 provide such tightening engagement of the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 about a vehicle steering column 24 through a one-handed operation as described hereafter.

[0030] One aspect of the attachment means 30 is shown in Figs. 1 and 2. The attachment means 30 include an elongated strap 32 preferably formed of a strong, lightweight, flexible material, such as ballistic material, i.e., ballistic grade nylon, etc. The strap 32 has a first end 34 and an opposed second end 36. Portions of the strap 32 are wound about shafts or legs 38 and 40, respectively, mounted in a connector 42.

[0031] As shown in Fig. 2, the second end 36 of the strap 32 is wound about the shaft 40 at one end of the connector 42 after the portion of the strap 32 adjacent to the second end 34 is passed underneath one end leg 46 of the connector 42, around the shaft 40 and then into engagement with an adjoining portion of the strap 32. Securement means, such as stitching 48, are employed to join the second end 36 of the strap 32 to an adjoining portion of the strap 32.

[0032] The upper portion 50 of the strap 32 extends from the point of attachment to the second end and is slidably mounted about the first end 16 of the

09982330-101801

enclosure 12, such as by passing the strap 32 through loops or other securement means 52 formed on the enclosure 12. Thus, the portion 50 of the strap 32 extends completely around the periphery of the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 to a portion 54 shown in Fig. 2 which loops around the first shaft 38 in the connector 42, passes under an opposite end leg 56, and terminates in the first end 34.

[0033] In this arrangement, the first end 34 of the strap 32 is movable away from the connector 30 to tighten the strap 32 and the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 in a smaller diameter in tight engagement with the exterior of the vehicle steering column 24 as shown in Fig. 3. The end portion of the strap 32 extending from the first end 34 is held underneath the end leg 56 of the connector 42 to tightly retain the strap 34 in any tightened diameter. Upward movement on the leg 56 of the connector 30 will release the cinching force thereby enabling the strap 32 to be re-expanded to its normal, enlarged diameter.

[0034] Use of the airbag arrestor 10 will now be described in conjunction with Fig. 3. As shown in Fig. 3, an airbag 60 is mounted within the vehicle steering wheel 22 rotatably affixed to the vehicle steering column 24. Although not shown in Fig. 3, a conventional transmission shift lever, windshield wiper control lever, headlight control lever, etc., are normally mounted on the vehicle steering columns. However, an ignition key switch 62 is depicted by way of example only.

[0035] First, the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 will be expanded to its fullest diameter and the open first end 16 will be slid over the steering wheel 22. The enclosure 12 will be pulled over the steering wheel 22 until the end wall 20 is disposed in contact with or in close proximity to the steering wheel 22. The attachment means or strap 30 will then be grasped at one end, such as the free first end 34, and pulled to tightly compress the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 into secure engagement with the exterior surface of the vehicle steering column 24.

[0036] In this position, the airbag arrestor 10 of the present invention is securely mounted on the steering column 24 so as not to exhibit any substantial axial movement away from the steering wheel 22 in a direction toward the vehicle driver. However, due to the flexible nature of the side wall 14 and end wall 20 of the enclosure 12, some expansion in overall size may occur; but not to any significant

0958330-101801

amount. The enclosure 12 will contain any inflation of the airbag 60. The gases used to inflate the airbag 60 will escape through the first end 16 of the enclosure 12.

[0037] After the airbag arrestor 10 is no longer needed, the connector 32 is released and the strap 30 expanded to its full diameter enabling the enclosure 12 to be removed from the vehicle steering wheel 22.

92
[0038] ~~Fig. 4 depicts yet another aspect of a connector 70 that may be used in~~
the airbag arrestor 10 of the present invention. The connector 70 includes a latch body 72 having a first end 74 about which the second end of the strap 32 is wound and secured to itself by the stitching 48 as described above. A pivotal latch member 76 is mounted about a shaft 78 at the other end of the body 72. The latch member 76 is biased downwardly at a first end 78 by means of a biasing means, such as a coil spring 80, mounted above the shaft 78 and acting on the opposed end of the latch member 76.

[0039] The first end 78 of the latch member 76 is provided with a secure gripping surface 82, such as knurling, serrated teeth, etc., which dig into and engage the strap 72 looped around one end of the body 72.

[0040] A hand release surface 84 is provided at the opposite end of the latch member 76 for pivoting the latch member 76 in the direction to disengage the gripping surface 82 from the strap 32 thereby enabling the strap 32 to be retracted with respect to the body 72 so as to enable the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 to be expanded to its fullest diameter.

[0041] At the same time, the first end 74 and the strap 32 may be pulled under force through the latch member 76. The gripping surface 82 prevents reverse movement of the strap 32 unless the hand release surface 84 is engaged to pivot the gripping surface 82 away from the strap 32..

[0042] Another aspect of the latch or connector member according to the present invention is shown in Fig. 5. In this aspect, a strap 92 is in the form of a cord, formed of ballistic grade nylon, for example, having first and second free ends 94 and 96, respectively. Both ends of the strap 92 extend through bores in a latch body 98. From the latch body 98, the two ends of the cord 92 extend through a folded-over portion on the first end 16 of the enclosure 12.

09982330-101801

[0043] The latch body 98 carries two identical latch members 100 and 102, each of which is provided with a gripping surface 104 at one end. The gripping surfaces 104 are disposed in the bores in the latch body 98. Biasing springs 106 carried on the latch body 98 bias the latch members 100 and 102 into a position in which the gripping surfaces 104 fixedly engage the two portions of the cords 92 to prevent reverse movement of the two portions of the cords through the body 98. However, downward pivotal movement of one end of either latch member 100 and 102 will disengage the gripping surface 104 from the respective portion of the cord 92 thereby enabling the respective portion of the cord 92 to be pulled through the latch body 98 to enable the diameter of the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 to be expanded.

[0044] Reverse directional pulling of either end 94, 96 of the cord 92 away from the latch body 98 reduces the length of the cord 92 within the first end 16 of the enclosure 12 thereby reducing the diameter of the first end 16 to enable the first end 16 to conform in snug engagement with the vehicle steering column.

[0045] Thus, there has been disclosed an airbag arrestor which uniquely arrests and contains the inflation pressures in a vehicle airbag when the airbag arrestor is mounted about a vehicle steering wheel and steering column. The airbag arrestor includes a flexible enclosure which can be easily mounted in a substantially non-expandable manner about a vehicle steering wheel. Attachment means in the form of a strap or cord is carried at an open end of the enclosure and extends through a connector to enable the first end of the enclosure to be cinched into a tightened, small diameter shape in secure engagement about a vehicle steering column, typically by a one-handed operation, to prevent substantial axial movement of the airbag arrestor enclosure along the vehicle steering column under airbag inflation forces.

09982330-101601